

Dear Friends and Visitors

Instead of the normal monthly News Update, I am happy to greet you with this letter from Rome, Italy. As abbot of Assumption Abbey, I am participating in the General Chapter of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the Order that the Abbey belongs to. The Chapter is being held at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools on Via Aurelia from September 4 through September 24.

A General Chapter is a meeting of all the superiors of the Order's monasteries throughout the world. At the beginning of the Order the Chapter was an annual event, but in modern times, the Chapter is held only every three years. There are several reasons for this change.

When the Order began, and throughout the first centuries of its existence, the monasteries were pretty much confined to France and to central and southern Europe. While travel was not necessarily easy in the 12th and 13th centuries, still, abbots did not have all that far to go to attend the General Chapter. Now, however, the monasteries of the Order are found in every continent of the globe, and travel is both extensive and, for some at least, difficult, given international politics.

Another difference between then and now regards the participants of the General Chapter. In the beginning and up until the second half of the 20th century, only the abbots attend the Chapter; the abbesses did not. But now both abbots and abbesses attend. That makes nearly 170 people. Add to them the delegates from the various geographical regions, a host of translators and interpreters, as well as a secretarial staff and you have well over 200 monks and nuns at a modern Chapter of the Order. To ask that many abbots, abbesses and other monks and nuns to be away from their monasteries for over three weeks every year is asking a lot. Thus, for several decades now the Chapter has been held every three years instead of annually.

There are two principal functions of a General Chapter, a pastoral one and a legislative one. By far the most important and the most engaging of these is the pastoral function. This is why the Chapter was instituted in the first place. It is an opportunity for those entrusted with the spiritual and material well-being of the thousands of monks and nuns of the Order to support and help each other in their precious, delicate and demanding ministry.

A typical day of the Chapter (there are no "days off," not even Sundays) begins with the Office of Lauds at 6:45 a.m., followed by breakfast. Plenary Session of all the capitulants begins with the Office of Terce at eight o'clock. The meeting proceeds throughout the day, sometimes in Plenary Session, sometimes in small groups (Commissions). The various working sessions are

interspersed with other Hours of the Divine Office, Mass and dinner. The working day ends around 6:30 p.m. The agenda is full of both minute legal points as well as sensitive pastoral ones. The atmosphere is respectful, prayerful, charged with good humor and the best virtues that the Cistercian vocation can bring to birth in monks and nuns who embrace it as the gift it is.

One day of the Chapter was devoted to the Cistercian Family. Among the several invited guests who spoke to the Chapter on this occasion were Mr and Mrs Francisco Ambrosetti. This fine couple are members of the Cistercian Lay Contemplatives associated with Holy Spirit Abbey in Conyers, GA. They were chosen by the assembled International Cistercian Lay Contemplatives meeting in Conyers in March of this year to represent this dynamic movement before the Chapter. They did a fine and convincing job.

On Thursday the 19th the entire Chapter boarded hired buses for the short trip from Rome to Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the Bishop of Rome. There we all gathered in the open courtyard of the papal residence for a private audience with John Paul II. When the Pope, assisted by two attendants, had entered and taken his seat, the Abbot General of the Order, Bernardo Olivera, delivered a short discourse of homage. Then the John Paul II addressed the Chapter in Italian with a prepared talk. After the talk, some twenty of the capitulants, men and women representing every age group and every region of the Order, were presented to the Pope one by one. Included among them was Bishop Mununu, Bishop of Kikwit, Republic of Congo. Bishop Mununu is the former prior of the Trappist monastery in Kasanza in that African nation. He attended the Chapter for a week.

The working days of the Chapter are full. Nevertheless, almost everyone finds time at the noon break or in the early evening to visit holy and historical places of this incomparable city. Not a few of us have by now our favorite gelateria! Some have been able to squeeze in a musical event or some other cultural experience. Among some memorable places is the ancient and beautiful church Santa Maria in Trastevere. There, each evening at 8:30, the Community of Sant' Egidio, together with nearly one hundred "drop ins," prays Vespers set to its striking music.

All in all, the Chapter is the privileged occasion for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance to both experience and strengthen the deep bonds of love and patrimony that unite us, bonds that are over 800 years old and that, in truth, connect us directly to Jesus of Nazareth and the little community he formed to share his life with, to the point of giving it up.

In the August News update mention was made of Assumption Abbey's commemoration of 9/11.

We decided to commemorate that unforgettable day with a Triduum, that is, three days of prayer and fasting. The word "Triduum" calls to mind the Easter Triduum, the three days at the end of Holy week preceding the Easter Vigil.

Our Triduum for 9/11 included September 9, 10, and 11. Each day had a theme, respectively, Lament and Condemnation, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Hope and Restoration. Special Psalms, hymns, and readings were chosen for all the offices during these days to highlight the day's theme. In place of the concluding prayer at each office, the community recited together a plea to God to expel from our world, and from our individual and familial lives, specific "evil spirits" that we discerned together to be most closely associated with the events and aftermath of 9/11. Finally, the community's main meal on each day of the Triduum was bread and water, the fast served otherwise only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Unfortunately, I had to miss this experience. Nevertheless, I participated with my brothers as best I could in prayer and fasting.

The General Chapter ends September 24. After a brief trip to Belgium to visit Fr Charles Dumont, a special mentor of mine in the Cistercian way, and a return to Italy to visit the vibrant community of Cistercian nuns at Vitorchiano, motherhouse of Matutut in the Philippines, I will, God will, be back at Ava on Oct 3. I want to assure you all that I pray for you in the holy places of Rome, especially before some of the most ancient images of the Mother of God.

Ciao!

Fr Mark, Abbot